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ABSTRACT

Appropriate for elementary school students, this resource unit on the American cowboy provides four activities for small group work. The unit also lists objectives and discusses the organization and dynamics of small groups. The general objective is for the student to learn how to work within groups and how to resolve group conflict. The activities involve students in writing a group poem about the American cowboy as depicted in movies and on television and drawing murals based on two verses of a poem about cowboys. A research project requires groups to choose a topic from five suggestions: Texas longhorn cattle, cattle branding, cowboy songs, cowboy dress, and cattle rustling. The project includes a creative group effort such as poetry, art, or fiction which illustrates the results of research. For the final activity students participate in a brainstorming session to determine the characteristics of a cattle ranch in the Old West. (KC)

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The American Cowboy: Developing Small Group Social Studies Experiences in the Elementary Classroom

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Statement of Significance

In the decade of the 80's, elementary school teachers will be making greater use of small interaction group experiences for the presentation of ideas and concepts in the Social Studies. Through classroom experience with small groups, teachers will find that students are more creative in the solution of problems, and that students enjoy working in small groups. Small groups often develop a sense of cohesiveness, a "bond", that stimulates members of the group to ask questions and search for answers beyond the range of any one particular member of the small group. Small group learning experiences can and do enhance many learning activities. In developing small group activities for students in grades three through eight, the teacher must consciously provide opportunities for this type of interaction to occur among all students.

This resource unit has been specifically designed to provide small group interaction experiences for elementary school students within the framework of a social studies unit on the American cowboy.

Objectives

1. Students will learn how to work within a group setting.
2. Giving students the experience of using various leadership roles within the setting of the small group.
3. Allowing students to learn, as a small group, how to formulate their own questions, and how to develop group consensus in the process of achieving a task.

Organizing of Small Groups

The following steps are suggested to help the teacher organize small groups within the elementary classroom setting:

1. Divide the class into heterogeneous groups, each group containing 5 students.
2. Explain to the class that each group may select, if it wishes, a group leader, recording secretary, etc., most groups elect not to have them.
3. The following rules are to be observed by each member of the individual small groups:
   a. All decisions are to be worked out within the group setting, by all members of that group.
   b. Differences of opinion about achieving group objectives or goals must be settled within the framework of the individual group.
   c. No private or confidential information discussed within the small group (about the assigned task or about members of the group) is to be discussed outside of the group. What is discussed within the small group stays within the confines of that group. No decisions collectively made by the group are to be discussed with classmates who are not members of the group.
   d. If a member of the small group disagrees with the decision of the group concerning an assigned task, every effort should be made to understand that member's objections and to help resolve them, as a group, within the parameters of the group. The value of working in a small group setting is to learn how to work with the other members of the group in resolving differences of idea or opinion.

4. When the class reconvenes, each group should present the results of their group effort to the entire class. Each group should explain how they arrived at their group decisions about the assigned task. What processes did the individual groups use to achieve group consensus? Did the students experience a variety of leadership roles? What group maintenance roles did they experience?
5. Unresolved conflicts within the small group may be referred to the classroom teacher for (a) clarification of issues, (b) identification of personality differences, (c) improper internal functioning of the group. When the teacher has helped to clarify issues or solved internal group conflicts, the members of the group should again meet to seek a solution to their assigned group task.

Group Task Roles

The role of each member of the group is to help the group select and define the common goals of the group. When common goals for the group have been selected and defined, the group can then work together toward a solution of the teacher assigned task.

Example

You want the 5 member small groups to work on the following project: What was the function of the Cowboy in the development of the American Southwest? Some group members, who are task oriented, "initiators", want to immediately get going. "Initators" are interested in arousing the interest of other group members

in the project. If the group begins to bog down in its attempt to deal with the project, it is often the "initiator" who suggests a new direction for the group to take. Another member of the group, the "information in-putter", likes giving data, opinion, or playing around with ideas. Others in the group may offer their personal opinions on the discussion topic, they are the "opinion givers". Another member of the group is the "elaborator". The "elaborator" expands on the topic from either a personal point of view or from reading he/she has done on the topic. The "evaluator" is constantly testing the validity of the contributions of the group. The "evaluator" tests the reality of suggestions and is quick to recognize any contradictions in ideas. The "decision-maker" seeks group consensus where needed, and may help individual members of the group through the decision making process. The "decision-maker" likes to resolve conflicts or controversy within the group. The "decision-maker" constantly tries to encourage the group to "make a decision". The self-appointed "gate-keeper" likes to set and maintain the goals of the group. The "gate-keeper" keeps the group on the proverbial straight and narrow path, deflecting irrelevant ideas when necessary. The "gate-keeper" sets standards, and maintains an agenda for the group. The "energizer" is another role found in a group. The "energizer" prods the group to reconsider its potential and stimulates members to even greater activity. The "procedural technician" is that member of the group who knows where to get materials for the group project. For small group projects, the "procedural technician" can be of immense value. As the group comes up with new and unique ways of exploring the function of the Cowboy in the American Southwest, it would be the "procedural technician"

who might be aware of a wide variety of audio-visual aids that the group might use to enhance and complete their project. In a task oriented small group, the problems associated with remembering all of the ideas suggested by the group members leads to the creation of another role, the "recorder". The "recorder" may record each suggestion offered by group members using paper, chalkboard,or other means. It is the group, not the "recorder", who decides which ideas to record.

These are functions or roles that members assume to help the group accomplish its task.

Group Maintenance Roles

While group task roles concentrate on the roles that members assume to help the group accomplish its task, there are also roles played by members of the group that deal with the personal relationships between group members. These roles or functions are known as group maintenance roles.

Example

Using the previous example of a 5 member small group assigned the task of dealing with the function of the Cowboy in the development of the American Southwest, one group member might be an "encourager". The "encourager" encourages various members of the group to speak up, giving their own ideas or opinions on the topic under discussion.

The "supporter" in the group is the individual who tends to agree with the ideas and suggestions offered by other group members. The "supporter" commends individuals within the group for their good ideas. A valuable member of the group is the "harmonizer". The "harmonizer" relieves group tension by cracking jokes or telling funny stories. The other important role of the "harmonizer" is that of mediator. The "harmonizer" attempts to mediate differing points of view. Finally, there is the role of "gate-keeper". The "gate-keeper" is the person who is always noticing that one or more members of the group are not offering suggestions or participating in the group. The "gate-keeper" encourages the silent members of the group to offer their ideas and/or suggestion to the group. The "gate-keeper" is effective in drawing shy or quiet group members into active participation within the group.

The various group maintenance roles that members of the small group assume actually help the group to maintain itself so that work on the task project can proceed.

Activities to Develop Small Groups

For the following four activities, the classroom should be divided into heterogeneous groupings. Each group should have 5 student members, which is the optimum number for good group interaction.

When each of the small groups have completed their project, the class is to reconvene. Each group is to present the results of their group assignment to the whole class.

Activity One

Ask your students to work on the following project:

In your individual groups write a poem about the American cowboy as depicted both on television and in films. Include in your poem something about the rough Western life that cowboys must have experienced from 1850 to 1900. You may include in your poem what you presently know about Indians, cattle thieves, horses, Longhorn Texas cattle, sheep, or anything else that is related to life in the West during this time period.

When the individual 5 member small groups have completed their poem(s), have them (a) read the poem for the entire class, (b) interpret their poem for the class, (c) tell the class how their small group worked together to achieve the completion of the assigned task.

When all of the small groups have finished discussing their own groups' poem, have the entire class search for the differences and similarities in the "facts" used by the individual groups in in the writing of their poems.

Activity Two

Ask your students to work on the following project:

You are going to be given two verses to a poem whose title is Cowboys(note to teacher: you may substitute such titles as Cattle Ranching in Arizona or Nighttime on the Range). Your

group task is to draw a mural based on those two verses. You may include any other ideas that your group might have about cowboys. Your group may even create a title for your mural. You should include something in your mural about the rugged life of a cowboy, the life of women in the early days of the West, roping and branding of cattle, sleeping under the stars on the open range, or other similar topics which you have read about or seen on television or in cowboy/Western movies.

When the individual groups have completed their mural, they should (a) display the mural on the classroom wall for the entire class to see, (b) interpret the mural for their fellow classmates, (c) tell how their group worked together to decide which characters and scenes to depict in the mural, and (d) how the group eventually assigned tasks while making the mural. The murals should be displayed around the classroom. If the entire class should decide to make a large mural for classroom display incorporating scenes from the individual group murals, then a specific amount of time should be alloted to the students to complete their artistic effort.

Activity Three

Ask your students to work on the following project:

Your group is to write a research report about the American Cowboy from 1860 to 1890. Your group is to decide which one of the following five topics they will research.

1. Longhorn Texas Cattle
2. Branding of Cattle
3. Cowboys Songs
4. How Cowboys dressed between 1860 and 1890
5. The Rustling of Cattle (Why were cattle rustled?)

Each person in your group is to write a specific part of this research project. You must make a group decision about who will research what part(s) of this group project. You may work individually on the group project, in groups of 2 or more, or as one large group. The group itself must decide how the research will be conducted. The group must decide which aspects of your chosen topic you will include in your group research project, and which aspects of the topic you will not have time to deal with. You must be ready to explain to the class why your group decided to include certain topics and why your group decided to exclude other topics in your final research project report.

The final research project report should include a creative group effort. Some examples of such a creative group effort might include one of the following examples. You are not limited to these examples.

Examples 11

A Cowboy/Western song, whose lyrics and music

were created by the members of the group.

A poem (or a series of poems) about American cowboys between 1860 and 1920.

A picture (or a wall mural) depicting a scene (or scenes) dealing with American cowboys.

A play about life on a cattle ranch in the Old West.

A clay project(for example, a reconstruction of an old Western cattle ranch or of the yearly cattle round-up).

Each group will be expected, as part of an activity for the entire class, to give a final research project report.

Each member of your group must participate, in some way, in presenting the final group report to the class.

Activity Four

Ask your students to participate in the following activity.

Each of the groups will participate in a brain-storming session. The purpose of brainstorming is to generate as many different ideas as possible in a short time. The following suggestions will help your group understand how a brainstorming session operates.

1. Let your imagination run wild.
2. Think up as many ideas as possible.
3. Build on the ideas of other group members.
4. Do not evaluate or judge any of the ideas at this time, we will have a special evaluation

group session later.

5. Do not give great detail when offering your ideas, we can do that at a later time.
6. Be concise and to the point.
7. Record every idea that is suggested in your group. You may appoint a recorder to take notes, or you may use a tape recorder.

Your topic for this brainstorming session is: What was a cattle ranch like in the old West? How did it operate? Who lived on the ranch? What did the cowboy do on the ranch?

You will have 30 minutes to brainstorm on this topic. After the 30 minutes is finished, we will share the ideas of the various groups, and develop answers for some of these questions.

When the 30 minute period is finished, have the groups come together and share the ideas that they generated through brainstorming.

Conclusion

Small group activities and projects can be a creative and enjoyable way for students to learn how to live and work with each other in a group setting, while accomplishing an assigned task.

In the setting of the small group students learn how to work with each other to form a cohesive whole. Students will experience the individual differences among the members of the group, and learn how to work together to strengthen the group. The experiences learned from working in a small group on an assigned task with a specific goal to be achieved, will have

transference for the student to other subjects or classes that they might have. Group experiences will prepare the students to learn how to interact with their fellow classmates and also with other members of society.

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